

OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

PRESENT STATE

OF

MUSIC,

Chapter IN *Letter*

LONDON.

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OF EXETER.

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GENERAL observations on any of the Arts are always suspected to be made with a view either to depress, or elevate, particular Artists: and, though it is to no purpose to declare the contrary, yet I cannot help following the example of Fielding and Le Sage; and, like them, must be permitted to say, that *things*, not *persons*, are my aim—*Music*, not *Musicians*, is my subject.

As a proof of my sincerity, I have not mentioned the name of any living
Professor;

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Professor; and, as much as possible, have carefully avoided any remarks which might lead to a particular application. I equally disclaim panegyric or satire. If my observations should, at times, seem to shrink from the matter, let it be remembered, that they were made under restraint; and the fear of giving offence may have prevented an exertion of the power to please, and destroyed some entertainment that the subject was well calculated to produce.

OBSER-

OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

PRESENT STATE OF MUSIC,

IN LONDON.

MUSIC is so much *the rage*—to use a fashionable term—that some remarks on the present Style of COMPOSITION and PERFORMANCE may not be unacceptable to the Public. But this, perhaps, is an hasty assertion: if we are pleased, we cannot feel much gratitude for the philosophy which demonstrates that we ought *not* to be pleased. Horace's MADMAN
is

is too trite an example to be quoted; but, if I may judge of the sensations of others by my own, we are not altogether in his situation: the delusion may be made to vanish, and reality substituted, without destroying “*animi gratissimus error.*”

As, perhaps, the purest and most enchanting pleasure which the mind can feel arises from Music—I address myself to those only who have an *ear* and *taste*—surely any attempt to heighten that pleasure is laudable: and if, by some awkward and unfortunate circumstances, our present pleasure is derived from polluted sources, it cannot be amiss to shew that they are so; and point out others which, by being more pure, are undoubtedly more capable of producing that exquisite sensation

sensation which it is the exclusive property of Music to bestow.

I MEAN but to give some detached thoughts on this subject, without form, just as they occur: but, though I do not affect method, I do not despise it; and shall think myself fortunate, if my arguments should, by accident, come in aid of each other,

PERFECT MUSIC—if my idea be just—is the uniting MELODY to HARMONY. Though the assistance which each receives from the other is immense, yet MELODY is best qualified to exist alone. The pleasure excited by a succession of chords, is very inferior to that natural, and sometimes artificial, succession

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of single sounds, which Musicians distinguish by the term *Melody*.

THOUGH not absolutely unknown, Melody was in a barbarous state until the last hundred years. It long continued improving, but now seems, in this country at least, to be in a fair way of shortly losing it's existence.

IN consequence of Music being much studied and practised, VOCAL and INSTRUMENTAL MELODY became two different things: it is necessary, therefore, to consider them separately.

VOCAL Music had once nothing but Harmony to subsist on: by degrees, Melody
was

was added; and now it is very near being lost again.

IN the Grand Opera, SONGS may be considered as *pathetic*, *bravura*, something *between the two* which has no name, and AIRS called *Cavatina*. Generally, the last have most Melody, and the first sort have least: but it is scarce worth while to ascertain which has most, where all are defective. If it were not for some passages that have been worn to rags, how few of these Songs possess the least trace of real Melody! This must remain an assertion without proof, unless I could define Melody: which I really cannot, so as to be intelligible to those who have no ear; and, to those who have, a definition would be needless. But let me observe, where

sounds follow each other in that arrangement, we call TUNE, besides the immediate pleasure, there is always joined with it an *Impression*, which enables us to remember passages, and sometimes an entire Air. But this is never the case in a fortuitous or unmeaning succession of sounds. Let the Music of the present day be “weighed in this balance,” and the greater part will be found “wanting.”

THESE same observations will do for the Opera *Buffa*, omitting the term *Pathetic*, and substituting *Comic* in it's room. But it is using THALIA very ill, to call the nonsensical folly of this Drama, *Comic*.

IN the ENGLISH OPERA, the Composers very wisely adapt some of the Songs to Tunes
which

which were composed when Melody really existed: and it is curious to observe how glad the Audience are to find a little that is congenial to their feelings, after they have been gaping to take in some meaning from the wretched imitations of Italian *bravura*, and pathetic Songs; which, alas! are but “the Shadows of a Shade!”

Chapter 6. The Opera

As the SONGS which are performed at CONCERTS are mostly taken from Italian Operas, they require no additional observations on the merit of the composition.

ANOTHER sort of Music is frequently part of those entertainments, called GLEES. No doubt, the uniting of three or more voices in harmony produces a pleasing effect. But
why

why is Melody to be banished? And banished it is so totally, that, of all the numerous Dirges and doleful Ditties with which our Benefit-Concerts are so forely afflicted—for they are too precious for *common use*—scarce one can be found that has half as much tune as one of Claude le jeune's Psalms.

I HAVE sometimes asked Musicians, why they perform such stuff? The constant answer is, "That they conform to the taste of the Public." And I really believe that they speak as they think; for it is certain that the Audience shew every mark of the loudest approbation. But it is in Music, as in the DRAMA; what is least felt, is most applauded. When an Actor rants, or gives a touch of what passes for pathetic, it is considered as a
mark

mark of insensibility not to be affected. Thus, when sounds have been uttered in which are not the least trace of a tune, it shews a superior taste and feeling to find something to admire, where the common ear is offended, or at best perceives nothing.

IF our VOCAL MUSIC has dismissed Melody as unnecessary; our INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC has closely followed the bad example.

THE old CONCERTO is now lost, and modern Full-Pieces are either in the form of OVERTURES or SYMPHONIES. The Overture of the Italian Opera never pretends to much; that of the English Opera always endeavours to have an Air somewhere, and the endeavour alone makes it acceptable. As the first movement

ment of the OVERTURE is most commonly like that of a SYMPHONY, what I have said of the latter will do for both.

WHEN Richter introduced among us this style of Music, it was justly admired, being the first instance of attention to the different character of Instruments; a nicety unknown to Handel, or to any of his predecessors. Richter was very successfully followed by Abel, and many others. But later Composers, to be grand and original, have poured in such floods of nonsense, under the sublime idea of *being inspired*, that the present SYMPHONY bears the same relation to good Music, as the ravings of a Bedlamite do to sober sense. Sometimes the Key is perfectly lost, by wandering

dering so far from it, that there is no road to return—but extremes meet at last of themselves. The Measure is so perplexed by arbitrary divisions of Notes, that it seems as if the Composer intended to exhibit a Table of twos, threes, and fours. And, when Discords get so entangled, that it is past the art of man to untie the knot, something in the place of Alexander's sword does the business at once. All these paltry shifts to conceal the want of Air, can never be admitted to supply it's place.

Chapter 5. The Air.

WHERE there is *really* Air, it will exist under all disadvantages of Performance. But, what would become of our Sublimities, if it were not for the short cut of a *Pianissimo*, so delicate as almost to escape the ear, and then

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a sudden change into all the *Fortissimo* that Fiddling, Fluting, Trumpeting, and Drumming, can bestow?

LET it not be imagined, that I wish to burlesque expressive Performance. I am only shewing my thorough contempt of that wretched stuff, the existence of which altogether depends upon mechanical contrivance, while the *soul* is wanting—

“ Thus Harlequin extoll’d his Horse,
Fit for the War, the Road, the Course:
His mouth was soft, his eye was good;
His foot as sure as ever trod.
One fault he had—a fault, indeed!
Pray, what was that?—The Horse was *dead!*”

PRIOR.

PERHAPS

PERHAPS I may be told, that though there is nothing of what I call *Tune* which exists in the first movement of SYMPHONIES; yet it is found in the middle and last Movements, where it is in it's proper place.

To which I reply—That though the kind of Air for first Movements is of a different cast from what it is in the others, yet it ought to exist there as well. Composers never substitute any thing for Tune, if they really have it in their head—it is too precious!

THE Airs we have been lately used to hear in the middle and last Movements of Symphonies, are, for the most part, *childish*; and, where they are not so, they are *vulgar*: characters neither suiting the piece, nor *what*

ought, at this time, to be the taste of the audience.

THE QUARTET and TRIO are in a much more respectable style; as are CONCERTOS for *particular Instruments*: those for the Piano-forte excepted; which, of late, seem to have abandoned that style of Melody so peculiarly the property of the Instrument, and exchanged the easy flow of execution, which it has cost so many years to establish, for staggering Octaves. The Cadences are invariably the same, and the worst that could be invented by an imagination perverted in the extreme! The Performer, no doubt, ought to be able to run from the bottom to the top of the keys, in semitones; but let him be satisfied with having the power,
without

without exerting it, for the effect of the passage is to the last degree detestable!

THE most pleasing of all Instrumental Compositions is the CONCERTANTE, for Three, Four, or Five principal Performers, supported by *Ripieni*. Whether the contrast of the different instruments becomes a sort of substitute for Melody, and is received as such; or, whether there is really more tune in the Concertante; or, whether we are more interested because of the excellence of the Performers; I know not: but it seems as if Air subsisted more in this than any other species of Instrumental Music.

WHAT I have hitherto advanced relates to Vocal and Instrumental COMPOSITION; except some accidental Remarks on *Performance*,
which

which naturally grew out of the subject. But there is more to be added on that head.

THE Performance of single SONGS was, perhaps, never farther removed from truth than at present. If there were a possibility of writing down the sounds which issue from the mouth of the Singer, my remark would be fully justified—but, unfortunately, Lines and Spaces will only express *musical* Intervals. Words seem as little suited to the purpose; for, how can one describe the encompassing a Note with frippery flourishes, that prevent the real sound from meeting the ear, until the time, in which it should be heard, is past? How can one express the filling up an Interval with something composed of a *slide* and a *shout*,

shout, by which means there is no Interval at all?

THERE are some things, however, which *may* be described: such as forcing the Voice in the upper part, where it ought ever to be soft; and fingering the lower tones faint, which should always be full. Cadences with, for ever, a concluding shake—though sometimes it seems as if it would *never* conclude—and every shake with precisely the same turn after it.

Chapter 6. Chorus

THE performance of CHORUSES is as perfect as that of Songs is deficient. The real Notes are heard without disguise; and, though the Composer is lost in the Song, he exists in the Chorus.

As

As there is nothing but Harmony in the GLEE, the performance of it cannot be falsified. The Notes, of necessity, are sung simply and true, to preserve the purity of the chord, which is all it has to subsist on.

WHATEVER objections may be made to the *Composition* of SYMPHONIES, the *Performance* of them is entitled to the highest praise. The Performer plays just what he sees, and nothing else: as is generally the case with most Instrumental Music; which is incomparably more pure in its execution, at present, than Vocal. Is it not rather uncommon, that two branches from the same stock should be so different?

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THE Notes of a Song are broken into so many parts, that they actually lose their existence: on the contrary, the performance of a Symphony, &c. is pure and simple. In the one, every thing is cut up; in the other—to borrow a phrase from Painting—the parts are kept broad: and breadth of effect is as necessary in Music as in Painting.

INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC has been of late carried to so great perfection in London, by the consummate skill of the Performers, that any attempt to beat the Time would be justly considered as entirely needless. I am sorry to remark, that the attention of the Audience, at *one* Concert, has been interrupted by the vulgarity of this exploded practice, which is unworthy of the supreme excellence of the

D Band,

Band, and highly disgusting to the Company.

THE Performance at the ABBEY is so peculiar, that I shall keep it distinct by itself.

THE idea of an Annual Exhibition of a great Composer's Works is noble, and worthy of the Patronage with which it is protected; but, like most other things, it has it's bright and it's dark side. The assembling the largest and best Band in the world to perform some of the finest Music ever composed, must be considered as something sublime; but the employing such an army of Musicians in a bad selection of pieces, as is frequently the case, is making a poor use of such a glorious display of voices and instruments.

It

It should be remembered, that as Homer and Milton have written many hundred verses beneath notice, so HANDEL has composed great numbers of pieces unworthy of his genius; but, as there is no want of those which are excellent, the best things only should be selected.

Chapter 6th

THERE is a fashion in Music as well as in Drefs; and, though the rich parliamentary robes of a Peer are above fashion, yet we expect, in common cloaths, the cut of the times. Now, there is much of Handel's Music that is not grand enough to be in the upper class; nor good enough to engage the attention of a Connoisseur; nor fashionable enough to be performed before an Audience, who are at least knowing in modern style.

These pieces should be suffered to sleep quietly in oblivion; for, however we may covet variety, no one chuses to change for the worse.

Chapter 6. *Handel*

WITH all my admiration of the Abbey Music, I think it has done a great deal of harm, and will do much more. The pieces which are performed there, have a mimic performance in almost every great town in the kingdom, which contributes to establish an exclusive taste for Handel's Music only. Any thing that helps to fix art to a *certain point* is destructive to farther improvement. Of this we have the strongest instance in a neighbouring country.

In the last century, Lulli was thought as highly of in *France* as Handel is in *England*.

Little

Little else but his Music was performed for many years. While the rest of the world was in a state of improvement, the French stood still; until they were left so far behind, that, perhaps, they may never get up their lost way, and be in the same rank with the other nations of Europe. This instance is the more remarkable, because, in the other Arts and Sciences, France has oftener been a leader than a follower.

THE harm which Lulli did in France, Handel has done, and will continue to do, in England. I just observed, that the Abbey Performance contributed to establish a taste for Handel, to the exclusion of the works of other masters. Now, this is another thing to be much lamented.

FOR

For ought we know, there are numbers of Composers in England who may be very worthy of notice, if they had the advantage of a public exhibition. These are prevented from shewing their abilities, by the idea that Handel alone can compose Oratorios, Anthems, &c. or that no one else can equal, much less excel, what he has done in that class of Music. But, by this prepossession, the public may be cheated out of much pleasure, and all possible improvement precluded.

Let us suppose, that such an exclusive taste had formerly prevailed for the Composers of the age of Charles the First, we then should have lost Purcel; and, if no Music but Purcel's could have been heard in the reign of George the First, Handel himself would have continued unknown.

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To say that this principle is illiberal, and unworthy of the age or country in which we live, may be considered as intemperate declamation. That it directly impedes the progress of Art and Science, has been already remarked: but, if the public would consider that their entertainment and pleasure are connected with successful novelty, they would surely give all attempts a fair trial; for one new piece out of fifty, being approved, is adding something to the stock of good Music.

THE first year of the Abbey Music was a Commemoration of Handel, and ought to consist of his works only; but it might, at this time, without any impropriety which I can perceive, be open for the works of other Composers.

Composers. Suppose that, each day, one new Instrumental Piece, and one for Voices, were permitted to be performed? Though I have not the least doubt, but that much good Music would, at times, be given to the public; yet, as my opinion may not pass for proof, the experiment might be tried for a year or two. In case of failure, the loss would not be great; but, if it should succeed, the gain might be immense.

AND here let me just observe, the great advantage PAINTING has over MUSIC, in the ease by which it's Professors may offer their works to the public attention.

THE EXHIBITION is open to all; besides which, every Painter has an Exhibition at his
own

own House. On the contrary, every public Musical Performance, in London, may be said, in most respects, to be upon an *exclusive principle*.——It must be remembered, that I profess avoiding every thing that leads to particular application. It is the *general* state of Music in this metropolis, it's defects, and it's excellences, which have been the subject of this short and imperfect sketch; which I leave to be finished by those who possess more ability, and greater sources of information.

FINIS.